Substance and Reputation
Successes and Challenges for Progressive and Left Parties and Governments in South America

AGUSTÍN CANZANI

Not so many years ago, a theoretician of continental repute (Harnecker 2000) published an account of the principal episodes in the story of the left in Latin America. It described the triumph of the Cuban revolution; the rise of the revolutionary left and rural guerrilla forces; Liberation Theology; the assumption of power by the Sandinistas and their subsequent electoral defeat; military dictatorships; and partial or supervised democracies; before moving on to the fall of the Socialist bloc; the Central American peace agreements; and the guerrilla campaigns in Chiapas. The only example from South America was the victory of Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) in Chile, followed by its overthrow.

Today, any observer surveying the region as the twenty-first century enters its second decade will be confronted by a rather different panorama, and will not hesitate to conclude that left and progressive forces have established a firmer foothold across the continent than ever before.

This reputation is clearly due, in part, to so many current or recent governments in Southern America branding themselves as progressive. That is the case, at least, in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela.[1] But it is also colored by the fact that many of the region's most prominent leaders – such as Lula, Chávez or Evo Morales – are champions of progressive and left-wing ideas. Another credible argument is that these governments are seen to be confronting – some more openly and others at least in their rhetoric – those neoliberal models generally identified as products of the Washington Consensus, and that they claim to offer alternatives. Although the differentiation between them has been discussed (Lanzaro 2008), another factor is probably that a number of them have put items on the political agenda

1. Except for Chile, where Concertación (Concert of Parties for Democracy) was defeated in the second round of the presidential elections in January, most of these progressive governments have been in power for periods of one to four years, or face favorable election prospects (Brazil).

that were not common among previous governments, including questions ranging from ownership of natural resources to regulation of the mass media. Similarly, their reputation will have been reinforced by issues such as redefining the model of state intervention, the mobilization potential of segments of the population who have not traditionally played a role, and high levels of public support for these administrations, providing a significant power boost and enabling them to take decisions on public policies affecting diverse vested interests, even some which are embedded in distant geographical contexts. Last but not least, as models associated to some degree with this kind of scenario (such as social democracy in Europe) find themselves in crisis, one key attraction of these governments is that they evidently constitute one of the few new developments in progressive and left-wing politics on the global stage.

It is by no means easy, however, to define the contours of the phenomenon, given the not inconsiderable variety of situations and views that have been clustered under this label. It suffices, for example, to consult the list of participants at the so-called Progressive Summit at Viña del Mar, Chile, in 2009. US Vice-President Joe Biden was invited, but not Hugo Chávez, who protested at his exclusion and that of others, such as Evo Morales and President Fernando Lugo.

Bearing these difficulties in mind, this paper seeks to set out a few preliminary hypotheses about the nature, reach, and limits of the phenomenon and to analyze a number of notable aspects of the progress of these governments and the challenges they face.

A Heterogeneous Set

In this continent at least, we have a major problem when it comes to clarifying the scope of the notions »left« and »progressive.« Even the formal definitions provided by the Spanish Royal Academy are fairly generic and in some ways contradictory. If we look up the word »left,« the recent entries of political relevance read: »in parliamentary assemblies, the set of party representatives who are not conservative or centrist« and »the set of individuals advocating reformist or, in general, non-conservative ideas.«[2] These two entries have been modified or deleted in the latest edition of the Dictionary. Although the definition of »progressive« has made some

2. See Diccionario de la Real Academia Española: http://www.rae.es/rae.html.

headway, alluding now to »an individual or group with advanced ideas and the attitude that this implies,« it is not particularly helpful.

Leaving aside strict linguistic definitions, we might consider whether identification proves easier by way of political parties, which seems to be common practice on other continents. Here the systemic reality of Latin American parties raises new challenges, due to a convergence of three different currents associated with left-wing and progressive forces. Two of these probably exhibit clear similarities to currents familiar on other continents, such as Europe, but the third is hardly comparable. The first current is made up of the historical parties of the traditional left, essentially aligned with the socialist and communist movements. Usually founded in the early years of the twentieth century, most of them are small parties, in the main with a merely token function and little, if any, parliamentary presence, having entered government on no more than a handful of occasions, and even then within alliances and for short periods, as in the case of Unidad Popular in Chile. The second, again with clear links beyond Latin America, is in the social democratic mould, although its role has been more modest. Weak and embryonic in Latin America until the late twentieth century, either because traditional left parties leaned more towards the classical left or due to a tendency to back insurrectionist strategies such as armed guerrilla warfare, it emerged more often than not through specific groups which took part in coalitions or alliances, more frequently over the past two decades. The third tradition is the one with roots in the »popular nationalist« camp, linked to certain forms of what is called Latin American »populism.« This type of political expression, closely associated with historical examples such as »Peronism« in Argentina and »Varguism« in Brazil, entails the construction of political subjects who bring together structures able to mobilize large sectors of the population, integrating them by means of social and/or political rights, and a powerful personal profile engaging in major confrontations with existing power structures, with effective links between the political structures set up as a platform for mobilization and the states where they are in government. In some cases, these have imposed restrictions on pluralism or displayed little concern for political tolerance.[3] Many forms of Latin American populism have enjoyed strong electoral support, and on several occasions they were ousted from government by military dictatorships. Their political structures do not

3. For a Latin American reading of this subject, see Laclau (2005).

always survive, but the tradition continues to be articulated through other partisan vehicles which champion the cause.

This distinctive factor should explain why, applying the conventional criteria, parties help to some extent to identify the phenomenon, but are still far from sufficient. Although some scenarios grant a role to classical forces of the left (the Partido Socialista in Chile, or Partido Socialista and Partido Comunista in Uruguay) or more recent parties of similar orientation (the Partido dos Trabalhadores, Brazil), their involvement does not always allow us to classify governments of this kind as left-wing, and there are several reasons for that. They may be part of a broader pre-election coalition which includes major parties such as the Christian Democrats (Chile) or progressive wings of traditional parties (Uruguay), or they may govern by parliamentary accord within a spectrum of parties far more diverse in their ideological complexion, an alliance forged through political agreements (Brazil). In other cases, the political instrument itself may follow a classical populist or popular national tradition, whereas the government apparently takes its cue from a dominant progressive grouping within the party structure (Argentina). The Latin American experience has also included some new political structures, such as the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement for Socialism, or MAS, Bolivia), some established virtually on the eve of taking power or even afterwards, as with the Movimiento Quinta República (Movement for a Fifth Republic, Venezuela) and PAIS (Alliance for a Proud and Sovereign Fatherland, Ecuador), or directly as the result of a purely electoral pact, which enters government but then fails to function smoothly, like the Alianza Patriótica para el Cambio (Patriotic Alliance for Change, or APC, Paraguay).

The difference between the two traditions seems to be important in combination with the nature of the party system and the structure of previously existing social movements, and when it is reflected in aspects of the political behavior adopted by the leaders of these structures.

Some party instruments have fairly deep roots within, or alliances with, social movements, and in some instances this may even account for their formation, as with the Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil, the MAS in Bolivia and the Partido Justicialista in Argentina. Or else they may view themselves, within a project for change, as strategic allies of the trade unions, such as the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in Uruguay. But there are also constellations where the links are more heterogeneous, such as the Paraguayan APC, or which resort frequently to plebiscites as a regular expression of their legitimacy, as in Venezuela or Ecuador.

The parties best able to build an organized base seem to be those which have for some time accepted electoral contests as a fundamental part of their political existence, and have even gained significant previous experience of government at local level prior to taking national office, as in Brazil and Uruguay. In these cases, over the medium term they have not merely strengthened the party system but have become a factor in its transformation. Those parties that operate on the basis of a more personalized leadership often take shape or consolidate within an electoral context, grasped as an opportunity. This constellation is frequently associated with a party system that is weak or, indeed, collapsing, which was the situation in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

In countries with older party structures and more institutionalized party systems, leadership tends to evolve around relatively long, significant political careers (Lula, Kirchner, Vázquez, Mujica), whereas in countries where these political instruments are more recent and party systems have witnessed crisis, leadership is closely linked to the personal charisma of key figures (Chávez, Correa, Morales, Lugo), who tend to be relative newcomers to political life, either entering as outsiders or advancing suddenly from secondary roles.

This diversity does not seem sufficient, however, to undermine the conclusion that all these scenarios can be placed within the context of the same political phenomenon, and there are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, in almost every case, these political organizations constitute the most significant left-wing formation in the ideological spectrum of the country concerned (Alcántara 2008), whether in terms of tradition, views expressed or electoral constituencies. Secondly, the majority of them have publicly articulated similarities in their orientation which extend beyond the limited or variable exchange afforded by regional interaction.

Common Features

There are also common, recurring aspects to these scenarios. Progressive governments in the region declare an intention to redress the situation they have inherited from previous governments, which in one way or another implies altering their neoliberal legacy. However, their plans will range from what might be regarded as tweaking the model to a desire for a different society, in the form of a new kind of socialism. The extent

to which these alterations actually progress also varies, and everything suggests that this depends not just on the intention itself, but also on the party landscape in each country, determined by institutional, economic, social and political structures and the level of restrictions or opportunities they encounter.

Situations such as the rise to power of Kirchner in Argentina – following an unprecedented economic crisis – or of Correa in Ecuador (after a series of acting presidents) or of Chávez in Venezuela (in the wake of corruption scandals and a meltdown of the party system), seem quite dissimilar to those faced by Concertación in Chile – with economic growth along with major restrictions deriving from Pinochet's authoritarian constitution – or by Lula in Brazil, faced with the problem of ousting a candidate put up by the political party of his predecessor in government. There are also contrasting institutional, political and electoral contexts, for example between the structured political system into which the Frente Amplio government was able to slip with its parliamentary majority after six electoral periods, and the unexpected victory of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, with a narrow majority and reduced parliamentary support.

These variables are determining factors in the construction of each government agenda. Depending on the context, they may entail a rather more gradualist approach – of which there are the more reserved varieties, as seems to be the case in Chile, and others that are more profound, as with Uruguay and in some respects Argentina – or, indeed, other processes, such as efforts towards reconstitution, reflected in substantial amendments to the constitution endorsed by plebiscite, as would appear to be the case in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

However, there are at least four factors which apparently cut across all these scenarios and might be regarded as common features.

The first is the ability of these governments to meet the basic requirements of public administration in general, and in particular to manage the so-called »macroeconomy.« Many of these scenarios were preceded by economic crisis, associated with drastic falls in output and financial crisis in a number of Latin American countries, and this seems to have initiated a learning curve in terms of managing economic policy. So far, in most cases, this has resulted in significant periods of growth, combined with an accumulation of reserves. While there is consensus that the global economic climate has been highly favorable to the development of Latin American countries, with rising global prices for raw materials and commodities, everything suggests that to date these governments have

passed the test when it comes to managing the economy, allowing them to lay one of the ghosts that have traditionally haunted progressive and left-wing forces in Latin America once they assume power. Today, their ability to generate economic growth and in particular to contain inflation does not appear to be in dispute.

The second is the repositioning of the role played by the state, and this acquires different forms depending on conditions in each country and the thrust of public policies. In some instances, this repositioning is expressed in a return to state ownership of certain natural resources or else state responsibility for their exploitation, which we can witness, with variations, in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, although there are also manifestations of it in Brazil and Argentina. In other countries, it takes the form of the state's return as provider of various social services – such as pension schemes in Argentina – or the restoration of key regulatory functions in a number of fields – such as health care in Uruguay. In all countries, it has substantially boosted the importance of social protection schemes, with public policies advancing in three different directions: ensuring decent conditions for the most deprived communities, essentially reflected in vigorous measures to combat poverty, often with direct income transfers; efforts to overcome inequalities by ensuring access to public services – extending eligibility, reducing inequalities in distribution, providing subsidies or public funding for certain schemes; and the enactment of new rights, fundamentally expressed in changes to labor legislation and in universal benefits.

The third is a major enhancement of the role of political life in society as a whole. This enhancement has brought about changes in the way political rhetoric is used in public debate, and advocacy of the valuable contribution politics can make as a pivotal element of social life. This repositioning also entails the reinstatement of antagonistic positions in political discourse, but this time applying the same rules that apply to the democratic contest for power. In the same vein, many of these governments clearly state their identification with ideologically inspired doctrines, something which has not been particularly widespread across the continent in recent decades.

The fourth aspect is the unfurling of processes to settle various historical debts, taking the form of reparations for inherited wrongs, the constitutional enshrinement of rights or the effective involvement of traditionally marginalized groups and communities in relevant public policies or, indeed, the political landscape. Although these processes have

been contradictory and their impact and nature may be open to debate, they are undoubtedly contributing fundamentally to building greater social cohesion. Human rights and the status of indigenous peoples or different races are clear examples.

Progressive Latin American governments[4] have steered an exit from the crisis, and while they have doubtless benefited from the economic tailwind of rising prices for commodities and natural resources, it is also evident that they have the skills to achieve more. They have demonstrated their ability to run the macroeconomy – including controlling inflation and managing debt – and, which is by no means trivial in view of what the continent suffered a few decades ago, to build up monetary reserves by various means, restoring a degree of leeway for economic policies, and introducing or reintroducing a number of intervention mechanisms unlike those of neoliberal models. Ultimately, they have been able to begin realigning their relationship with the market. In every scenario, they have complemented such measures with a strong framework of social policies, ranging from more classical interventions – measures to compensate for inequalities, the provision of goods and services associated with welfare – to an incipient revamping, with various levels of complexity, of systems of social protection.

These successes on the economic front cannot disguise the existence of major outstanding issues, such as investment rates that remain inadequate, significantly inhibiting the expansion of growth which does more than keep idle factors of production ticking over. Potentially, this could counteract the improvements in distribution, partly because these are evidently closely linked to the economic cycle and partly because levels of growth are key to continuing to fund compensatory policies.

The problems of combating inequality seem to be associated with the challenge of establishing a new model of accumulation, given that most economies are still operating restrictive policies, geared towards tapping the yields of more dynamic sectors. The leap from creating better conditions for economic activity to more development-oriented

4. Many of the issues mentioned here are closely linked to the outcome of analyses and debates conducted in the course of various activities of the network Red de Fundaciones Progresistas del Cono Sur, which has been organizing seminars, workshops and publications since 2008 with the participation of CEPES (Argentina), the Fundación Chile XXI (Chile), the Fundación Líber Seregni (Uruguay), and the Fundación Perseu Abramo (Brazil), as well as the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

policies is still far from able to quell the latent volatility which underlies the economies of most of these countries in order to manage factors such as the evolution of prices for principal products and the dynamics of capital flows, or the structural unevenness that entails big differences in productivity between one sector and another.

These countries have also inherited patterns of weak public finance, further debilitated by preceding governments, and structures of taxation that in most cases were regressive. In this respect they find themselves in situations essentially different from those in which European social democrats operate. There has been some success in capturing a larger proportion of national revenue by intervening directly to exploit natural resources or by designing direct taxes specifically linked to these activities. Evidently, however, a more radical reshaping of the taxation structure presents problems, as does building efficient and effective state administration in these areas. Besides, changing taxation has become trickier, given a basic lack of confidence in the purpose of government spending. Neoliberalism has defined a paltry, inefficient role for the state, which makes progress on these matters difficult, and many of the coalitions to which progressive political forces belong have imposed limitations on such reforms.

However, it is vital to recover this territory as a key to progressive policies, for this is what makes it possible to generate substantial advances in distribution and to uphold policies with greater transformational potential in the medium and long term.

Progressive governments similarly confront very significant challenges with regard to their ability to frame education and training for the knowledge-based society as a new model for development, without allowing the education system simply to churn out labor to meet a limited demand, creating segmented economies and helping to reinforce inequality. In a number of countries, the left has played a fundamental role in resisting neoliberal education reforms, but in the present climate it seems crucial to advance in a number of directions. The call for greater equality in the education system is clearly reflected in the need for thoroughgoing reform of education that seems to have been designed to suit the middle classes, but has serious problems adjusting to new requirements and catering for the entry of other social groups. This likewise implies recognizing the need for substantial progress towards changing the educational environment in schools, so that they are not merely centers of reproduction, but places for knowledge creation and

cultural expression, which would enable education to play a key role in changing the civilisatory role of societies.

It is equally crucial to remember that the social distribution of knowledge is a key factor in combating inequalities. To be part of the knowledge-based society is to be part of global society, and not being part of it is a form of exclusion that restricts social participation, a key aspect of the progressive model. There is a need to move forward to models that ensure the universal availability of the information technologies, while overcoming crude digitalization and designing systems that will combine access to the new technologies with assistance in using them, inspired by a desire to enhance not only productivity, but also rights.

Many of these challenges are also associated with a need to rethink the role and, ultimately, the structure of those nation-states through which progressive governments in the region operate. While there seem to have been substantial advances with regard to restoring the state in certain fields of the economy, providing public services and guaranteeing rights, there are still evident deficits in terms of both structure and the conception and management of state agencies. Beyond observing that it is difficult to engage in progressive politics with a state inherited from neoliberals, there needs to be a radical debate to avoid simple restoration and to create the right structures in order to achieve new political objectives at this moment in history.

The challenges are not confined to governments. In this context, the political parties that represent or are associated with these governments currently in power likewise face major challenges with regard to how to develop leading personnel and how to adapt their organizational formats and their working methods to meet new conditions.

It does seem clear that the logic of electoral contestation is increasingly being accepted as legitimating governments and to a large extent this has gradually changed left and progressive parties in the region. As a result, parties in many of these countries now have political structures which include strong capacity-building for running election campaigns and mobilizing support, along with the other elements that might be required to enter the electoral race in the classic sense. In many instances, however, their appeal remains in part attached to the charisma of certain historical leaders, with whom not only parties but also governments are identified. The decisive influence of these leaders is not confined to the composition of government and relations with the electorate, but also clearly sets its stamp on the patterns of political behavior. Developing

organizations with a vitality of their own that can outlive these leadership phenomena is a key issue.

The importance of these governments in the countries concerned also incurs the risk that they may turn into chameleons or become alienated from their origins. The risk of becoming a chameleon occurs if there is excessive overlap with the government, so much so that the boundaries between the party structure and the government structure are ignored or, indeed, dissolved. The risk of alienation arises when a government cuts itself loose from political parties or movements. Parties, as the vehicles of historical projects, need to strike up a relationship with governments which allows them to drive those processes forward without forgetting that the experience of government is contingent and, consequently, temporary.

South America is probably the most interesting region in the world from a left-wing or progressive perspective, and this merits close attention from other corners of the globe. The attention is quite likely to be founded on a generalization which often overlooks the tensions between different models of progressive development across the continent, whether more left, more social democratic, or more popular and national in inspiration. But these distinctions should not blur the significant indications of common identity which permit different experiences of national politics to be clustered under the same heading. Rigorous analysis of their characteristics and the story of their successes, failures, and challenges will contribute to repositioning a Latin American perspective within the international debate on progressive and left-wing thinking.

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